



*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*

**Message from**  
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**to the**  
**REGIONAL CONSULTATIVE MEETING ON CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT OF**  
**ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS TO PROMOTE HEALTH SYSTEMS AND POLICY**  
**BASED ON PRIMARY HEALTH CARE**  
**Beirut, Lebanon, 7–10 December 2009**

Excellencies Ministers of Health, Heads of Public Health Institutions, Distinguished Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the Regional Consultative Meeting on Capacity Development of Academic Institutions to Promote Health Systems and Policy Based on Primary Health Care. This meeting brings together the public health academia and national health policy-makers to chalk out a course of action and develop a strategy that will enhance the role of academic institutions in promoting health systems and evidence-based policies for primary health care in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Ministry of Health of Lebanon for agreeing to host this meeting, and His Excellency Dr Mohammed Jawad Khalife, Minister of Health, for his kind presence on this occasion.

The reaffirmation of WHO's commitment to the universal values of primary health care has been at the heart of the Organization's work in recent years, and especially during 2008 which marked the celebration of the 30th Anniversary of the Alma Ata Declaration. The international conference on primary health care held a year ago in Doha, Qatar, in which policy-makers, academic institutions, civil society organizations, development partners and community representatives came together, culminated in the proclamation of the Qatar Declaration on Primary Health Care. Through this declaration all twenty-two ministers of health of the Eastern Mediterranean Region committed their governments to promoting health policies and systems based on the values and principles of primary health care – solidarity, equity, social justice, participation, and patient centeredness.

There was a clear purpose and rationale for involving academic institutions in WHO's renewed commitment to primary health care in the Region. The public health training and research institutions of the Region have hitherto not been able to play their role in the development of primary health care based health systems in the Region to their full potential. This is not the primary concern that needs to be debated now. However, what is needed is a profound discussion on the reasons underlying the lack of engagement of the academic institutions in the past and a forward looking strategy that provides direction for their greater role and involvement in the future. I have no doubt that this must have been deliberated extensively during the past couple of days and I look forward to the strategic directions and recommendations that have been proposed to enhance the role of public health institutions.

I have carefully looked at the objectives of this consultative meeting. They are concerned with: promoting collaboration among academic institutions in the area of training and capacity-building, and research in health policy and systems; increasing cooperation among academic institutions and policy-makers for improved use of research-based evidence for decision-making; and launching a regional network of public health training and research institutions in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

I am sure that the representatives of the public health institutions will have extensively debated each one of these. Indeed, such consultative meetings provide an opportunity to academic institutions to get to know one another's work better, to discuss common areas of interest and to develop collaborative programmes in synergy. Of course, this is easier said than done. Among other things, it requires a level of institutional maturity and a shared sense of purpose, that is, to better serve the people of the Region. I have a feeling that this may be a turning point for our institutions, wherein they will demonstrate the wisdom and maturity of undertaking collaborative work beyond individual interests. In this regard, I would like to acknowledge the effort of the members of four academic institutions of the Region, who volunteered to prepare the background paper for the consultative meeting in a spirit of harmony and collaboration. We need to see more such initiatives in the future.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The role of public health institutions in any country or region goes beyond training health professionals. As pointed out in the background paper for this meeting, public health education, evidence-based health policy and systems research, and public policy and practice are the three pillars that define the role of public health institutions. There are a few public health institutions in the Region that accomplish all these functions while there are some that do not fulfil even one. Of these, the institutional capacity for evidence-based research, and its impact on national health policies and practices, are areas that have remained relatively unaddressed and need the attention of everyone. Hence, in this region despite a well established public health academia, the contribution of public health academic institutions to health systems development has clearly not met its full potential.

I am extremely pleased that policy-makers from the Region have shown great interest in participating in this meeting. This is not only a reflection of their commitment to the development of

national health systems based on primary health care, but also their recognition of the important role of public health institutions in improving health systems performance. I would like to take this opportunity to request the policy-makers to demonstrate unequivocal commitment and support for the strengthening of these institutions in countries of the Region. Greater political commitment, financial support, institutional autonomy, academic freedom and recognition of their work would go a long way in enhancing the role of these institutions and subsequently in the development of evidence-based national health policies and programmes. Such a relationship can only result in a win-win situation for everyone.

It is heartening to note that in this consultative meeting an effort has been made to establish a network of academic institutions of the Region. While WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean would be pleased to facilitate this initiative, the success of such a network will only be achieved if it is owned by the institutions themselves. If done well, such a network can bring immense benefits in terms of sharing of institutional expertise, development of joint training programmes, joint research initiatives and a stronger collective voice, which will be much better heard by policy-makers and development partners. I would urge the institutions not to ask – what is there in this for us? Instead they should work towards a shared goal that benefits the development of the health systems and health of the people of the Region. I can assure you, in time everyone will benefit. This is what I meant by institutional maturity when I alluded to it earlier in my speech.

Let me once again assure all of you that WHO has been and will continue to support the development of academic institutions in the Region. The Regional Office has prepared a six year strategic plan, covering the period 2010–2015, to promote primary health care in the Region, and strengthening of academic institutions is a key component of that plan. The role of these institutions is critical to the renewed commitment to the development of health systems based on primary health care and this time it will not be overlooked. WHO is keen to support capacity-building in the development of appropriate training programmes, health systems research and public health practice prototypes, and in helping to scale up these initiatives by advocating with Member States,

I keenly look forward to the outcome of this meeting in terms of formalization of the network of academic institutions and a regional strategy for enhancing their role in the form of action oriented recommendations and feasible next steps. These will be considered seriously by the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Task Force on Primary Health Care and the Regional Office will remain steadfast in playing its catalytic yet strategic role in support of public health academic institutions.

Finally, I wish you a pleasant stay in the beautiful city of Beirut and thank you once again for your active participation in this meeting.